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Robert Southey and His Age: Ageing, Old Age and the Days of Old

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Throughout a four-decade career, the controversial poet, historian, biographer and essayist Robert Southey explored the trajectories both of his own individual life and of the time and the society in which he lived. Using a range of published and unpublished sources, including Southey's vast correspondence, this essay will track this preoccupation for the first time and consider its implications for understanding both of Southey and of Romanticism.

From the earliest part of his writing life, Southey recorded his awareness of moving from one stage to the next, of progressing from youth to old age. In 1797, when he was 23 years old, he wrote that 'experience has taught me wisdom, & I am again as silent — as *self centering* as in early youth'.¹ In 1808 he dismissed the double negatives that had littered his early poems as 'the sins of my youth', and in 1812 described a meeting with Percy Shelley as acting 'upon me as my own Ghost would do. He is just what I was in 1794' (*CLRS*, iii. 1475, iv. 2012). By 1813, when he was thirty-eight, he felt 'older in mind than in years, and in years than in appearance' (*CLRS*, iv. 2211). This belief only grew as he entered 'the middle stage

¹ *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey: Parts One-Six*, gen. eds Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford and Ian Packer, *Romantic Circles* (2009-17), i. 193.

< https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters >

(Hereafter cited in the text as *CLRS*, followed by part number and letter number.)

of life' and became aware of 'years pass[ing] away more rapidly' than 'weeks in youth' (*CLRS*, vi. 3485). It was accompanied by the feeling of having 'grown old at heart' and being 'a good deal altered', particularly after the death of his nine-year-old son Herbert in 1816, a loss that 'changed' Southey 'more than years or bodily disease could ... have done' (*CLRS*, v. 2875, vi. 3603). Herbert's death was, unsurprisingly, accompanied by a growing awareness of Southey's own mortality. As he explained to friends, 'My father died at 48, my mother at 50', 'the race [Southey's family] is not long-lived, and I do not expect to prove an exception to it' (*CLRS*, vi. 3305, v. 2829). By 1819 Southey, 'hard upon the close of ... [his] 45th year', perceived in himself 'certain infirmities connected with decay' and acknowledged that he did not know what 'the length of my lease may be' (*CLRS*, vi. 3299). By 1825 he was describing himself as 'half a hundred years old'.²

Southey's mid-life concerns about growing old were in part driven by the knowledge that his family relied upon the money earned by his pen. This made him extremely conscious of the financial impact of ageing and possible incapacity for a professional writer. The situation was given added piquancy by personal history: both Southey and his first wife Edith were the children of bankrupt fathers.³ In order to safeguard his family's future, Southey took out a life assurance policy in 1813 at the age of thirty-nine.⁴ Fiscal awareness also impacted on his handling of completed, but unpublished, works. The publication of *Madoc* was initially delayed by Southey's belief that 'in case of my death it will be a post obit bond for my family of

² Robert Southey to Joseph Cottle, 7 April 1825, The Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

³ W.A. Speck, *Robert Southey Entire Man of Letters* (New Haven and London, 2006), 27-8, 35.

⁴ Michael Gamer, *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry* (Cambridge, 2016), 167-72.

considerable value' (*CLRS*, ii. 459). The journals kept during Southey's travels in the Netherlands (1815) and Scotland (1819) were also revised and copied with the idea that they could be published after his death, thus providing a new source of income for his heirs.⁵ In addition, Southey envisaged his proposed 'memoirs' 'as a post-obit for those of my family who may survive me' (*CLRS*, v. 2761). This impulse to record his own life for posterity, whilst simultaneously contributing to his children's financial security, underpinned the series of finely detailed autobiographical letters Southey produced in 1820-26.⁶ These were intended to provide information for a future authorised life, an eventuality Southey attempted to ensure by, in the 1830s, appointing his confidant and fellow man of letters, Henry Taylor, as his literary executor and official biographer.

Southey was equally attentive to his textual posterity and determined that his name and writings would 'not perish in the dust'. He worked to ensure he was amongst the ranks of authors whose books were read long after they had died.⁷ In the mid 1830s he jumped at an offer from Longman to publish a new ten-volume edition of his poetry.⁸ This allowed Southey to put that part of his literary estate in order and to present his poems as he wished them to be seen (and read) by posterity. As he explained:

⁵ This did not happen, possibly because of the family feuding dealt with later in this article. They appeared, respectively, as: *Journal of a Tour in the Netherlands* (Boston and New York, 1902) and *Journal of a Tour in Scotland in 1819*, ed. C.H. Herford (London, 1929).

⁶ Seventeen of these were sent to John May between July 1820 and January 1826. An eighteenth was begun but left incomplete and unsent. They cover a period up to 1788, when Southey was a pupil at Westminster School.

⁷ 'My Days Among the Dead are Past', ll. 1, 4, 6, 23-4, in *Robert Southey: Later Poetical Works, 1811-38*, gen. eds. Tim Fulford and Lynda Pratt (4 vols, London, 2012), i. 313-4.

⁸ *Robert Southey: Poetical Works, 1793-1810*, gen. ed. Lynda Pratt (5 vols, London, 2004), v. p. xxviii.

... to collect and revise them is a duty which I owe to that part of the Public by whom they have been auspiciously received, and to those who will take a lively concern in my good name when I shall have departed.⁹

Southey revised and reordered sonnets, epics, romances, odes, inscriptions and other poems for the new edition. He also wrote a series of prefaces that provide his final public word on his poetical career and on the controversies with which he had been involved. Southey saw this work as a 'serious task' that involved 'resuscitat[ing] the past' (*PW*, i. p. xii). It also entailed reconfiguring and reshaping that same past to suit the image he wished to present. The complex process involved can be seen clearly in his handling of the works produced in his official capacity as Poet Laureate, a post he had assumed in late 1813 but grown to loathe. The Laureate poems included in the edition of 1837-8 were not collected together in one place, but were instead distributed across three volumes, fragmenting understanding of what Southey had actually done with the role (*RSLPW*, iii. pp. xxiii-xxiv). Moreover, they were not all clearly labelled as Laureate productions and the occasions they had been written for were not always made explicit. It was, thus, not obvious to readers of the 1837-8 edition that 'Thanksgiving for Victory' had originated as Southey's official New Year's Ode for 1816, and 'On the Battle of Algiers' as that for 1817 (*RSLPW*, iii. 101-3, 111-13). In addition, some Laureate poems were suppressed, including 'Ten fateful years have passd away', an ode written in April 1820 in celebration of George IV's official birthday (*RSLPW*, iii. 171-2). Southey's last lifetime edition thus reflected his long-term disenchantment with the Poet Laureateship at the same time as it set out his case for posthumous fame. It also had another important aim. By

⁹ Robert Southey, *Poetical Works* (10 vols, London, 1837-8), i. p. [v].

publishing new, revised editions of his poems he extended their term of copyright, thus ensuring that he and then his heirs would continue to benefit from sales of his work. For Southey, who had endured the piratical publication of *Wat Tyler* in 1817 and an unauthorised edition of his *Poetical Works* by Galignani in 1829, the 1837-8 edition was therefore a final attempt to reassert control over his own literary property (*RSLPW*, i. xxxv-xxxvi).¹⁰

Southey laboured long and hard to bolster himself and his family against the potential impact of old age and death and to secure his posthumous reputation. Unfortunately, in his case, the old age he had so long anticipated arrived suddenly, whilst his preparations were incomplete. By the late 1830s, Southey was seriously ill, suffering from a degenerative condition. Rather than enjoying the flourishing late life characterised by Isaac D'Israeli in which 'for the aged man of letters memory returns to her stores, and imagination is still on the wing, amidst fresh discoveries and new designs', Southey was in stages deprived of the ability to socialise, to remember, to write, to read, and, eventually, to speak.¹¹ His death from typhoid on 21 March 1843 came as a release. As his widow wrote on the same day, 'Thank God his sufferings are over'.¹²

Contemporaries who witnessed these last years left accounts of the effects on Southey of old age and ill health. Henry Crabb Robinson, who accompanied him on his final continental tour of 1838, noted that during their travels he 'seldom spoke' and was disinterested in visiting the Louvre and other Parisian sights, unusual for

¹⁰ Longman, Southey's publishers, were explicit that they were commissioning the 1837-8 edition in order to prevent the 'French edition' (i.e. the Galignani one) from having 'the whole world to itself', Longman to Robert Southey, 5 July 1836, Longman Archive, Correspondence, quoted in *RSPW*, i. p. xxviii.

¹¹ [Isaac D'Israeli], *The Literary Character, Illustrated by the History of Men of Genius, Drawn from Their Own Feelings and Confessions* (London, 1818), 319.

¹² Caroline Bowles Southey to Henry Herbert Southey, [21 March 1843], MS in a Private Collection.

someone with Southey's cosmopolitan and international interests. During the course of their travels it became painfully clear 'to how great a degree the mind of the Laureate was departed'.¹³ Caroline Bowles, Southey's second wife, charted his long decline in her letters to family and friends. His children described how he increasingly failed to recognise them. 'My Father', Kate Southey recorded, 'did not know me ... he looked me full in the face & asked me who I was'.¹⁴ Whilst his brother, the physician Henry Herbert Southey, attempted to reassure friends that although the 'mind is gone ... He does not suffer'.¹⁵

Southey's situation was made even worse by the family feuding that had arisen after his marriage to Bowles on 4 June 1839. His children took sides: Edith May, his eldest daughter, sided with her new stepmother, whilst his younger daughters, Bertha and Kate, and son, Cuthbert, were implacably opposed to Bowles. Southey's growing mental and physical incapacity meant that he was unable to intervene in or resolve these familial disputes. Indeed, his illness seems to have fuelled the antagonism. Bowles's opponents claimed that she had known about his poor health before their marriage and should therefore never have consented to their union, something vigorously denied by Bowles and her supporters. The arguments continued after Southey's death: the opposing sides refused to speak to one another at his funeral, and Bowles and her stepson Cuthbert Southey disputed which of them was responsible for settling the burial expenses. The impact on Southey's plans to

¹³ *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler (3 vols, London and New York, 1869), iii. 154.

¹⁴ Unpublished 'Statement of Kate Southey about the affairs connected with her father's second marriage', Victoria University Library, Toronto, quoted in Lynda Pratt, 'Family Misfortunes? The Posthumous Editing of Robert Southey', in Lynda Pratt (ed.), *Robert Southey and the Contexts of English Romanticism* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2006), 223.

¹⁵ Henry Herbert Southey to John May, 18 October 1841, Hampshire Record Office, 2M69/94; quoted in 'Family Misfortunes?', 223.

secure his reputation was dramatic. Taylor, his chosen biographer, was an opponent of Bowles and therefore unable to get her supporters to send essential information and papers to him. He abandoned his plans for an authorised 'Life'. In its stead, the opposing factions produced two, different, in effect rival, accounts: Cuthbert Southey's *Life and Correspondence of the Late Robert Southey* (1849-50) and John Wood Warter's *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey* (1856). These were supplemented by competing editions of two unpublished poems: *Oliver Newman* (1845), edited by Southey's nephew and son-in-law the anti-Bowlesian Herbert Hill; and *Robin Hood* (1847), edited by Bowles herself.¹⁶ This division of effort and bifurcation of focus worked directly against the authorised, coherent image Southey had wished to present to posterity and in turn impacted on his longer-term reputation.¹⁷

Southey's personal experience of old age was of incapacity, insensibility and inarticulacy. However, this should not obscure the range and complexity of his comments about the subject in his earlier, active, articulate years. Indeed, throughout his writing life Southey was interested in the aged. Elderly figures appear often in his poems. They narrate 'The Grandmother's Tale', 'The Old Chikkassah to His Grandson' and 'The Cross Roads', contrast the past with the present in 'The Old Mansion House', dispense wisdom in 'Old Christoval's Advice, and the Reason Why He Gave It' and provide gothic shocks in 'A Ballad, Shewing How an Old Woman Rode Double and Who Rode Before Her' (RSPW, v. 313-16, 284-8, 308-12, 293-300;

¹⁶ *Oliver Newman: a New England Tale, Unfinished: with Other Poetical Remains* (1845) and *Robin Hood: A Fragment. By the Late Robert Southey and Caroline Southey* (1847).

¹⁷ The fullest account of the issues dealt with in this paragraph is 'Family Misfortunes?', [219]-238.

RSLPW, i. 150-1, 84-8). Portrayals of later life are not confined to Southey's poetry, they are also found in his prose. The *Life of Wesley* (1820), Southey's controversial study of the founder of Methodism, devoted a section to 'Wesley in Old Age'.¹⁸ His letters shed further light on his views, including the impact of ageing on members of his extensive social network. After a visit from his 'excellent friend' the educationalist Andrew Bell, Southey recorded that he had 'never' seen an example of 'so active & joyous an old age' (*CLRS*, vi. 3244). Bell was not a unique example. The banker Charles Lloyd, 'a Quaker & a very remarkable man', was similarly engaged, amusing himself in 'old age ... by translating Homer & Horace into very respectable verse' (*CLRS*, v. 2800). Even 'the last stage of bodily infirmity from old age' did not prevent Southey's uncle, the clergyman Herbert Hill, from possessing 'perfect' faculties, an 'unabated' love of books and learning and 'a hand which has lost nothing of its firmness'.¹⁹ Not all of Southey's acquaintances were so fortunate. The importance of retaining one's mind, even in extreme old age, was illustrated by the case of the theatre proprietor John Palmer, who 'outlived his reasonable faculties' and became 'a pitiable spectacle of human weakness & decay', hideously ugly, his nose ... grown out in knobs & bulbs like an underground artichoke, his fingers crooked & knotted with the gout; dirty, irascible ... <helpless as> an infant ... <feebler than one in mind>'. Southey, who had been taken as a child to visit Palmer, recalled how the sight of him 'always excited in me a mingled feeling of ... <horror> & disgust, not to be recalled without some degree of pain' (*CLRS*, vi. 3665).

¹⁸ Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley; and the Rise and Progress of Methodism* (2 vols, London, 1820), ii. 538-49.

¹⁹ Southey to Caroline Bowles, 14 October 1825, *The Correspondence of Robert Southey with Caroline Bowles*, ed. Edward Dowden (Dublin and London, 1881), 88; and Southey to John May, 18 October 1824, *The Letters of Robert Southey to John May: 1797-1838*, ed. Charles Ramos (Austin, Texas, 1976), 201.

For both Palmer and Southey's housekeeper, Mrs Wilson, who 'lingered eight days after a paralytic stroke had deprived her of all her senses, & as we hope of all sense of suffering', death was a blessed release (*CLRS*, vi. 3462). In the cases of those who, Southey argued, had lived a good and productive life and could look forward to eternity, it was also not to be lamented. For Mary Delamere, whom he had known since childhood, death was 'the best thing which [could] ... happen to a good old age' (*CLRS*, vi. 3542). Whilst in the revisionist epic *Joan of Arc* (1796), the aged hermit Bizardo, Joan's childhood mentor, has what might be described as a good end, notable in a poem punctuated by violent deaths in battle and whose eponymous heroine is fated to be burned at the stake:

In full of years he sunk: his eyes grew dim,
 And on the bed of leaves his feeble frame
 Lay helpless. Patiently did he endure,
 In faith anticipating blessedness,
 Already more than Man in that dread hour
 When Man is meanest. His were the best joys
 The pious know, and his last prayer was praise.

(*Joan of Arc* (1796), i. 295-301, *RSPW*, i. 17)

Southey's response to the demise of Queen Charlotte in November 1818 struck a similar note. The event was, he explained in a draft Laureate ode, to be regarded as 'No cause for sorrow then, but thankfulness, -/ Lifes business well performed,/ When weary Age lays down its load,/ And falls asleep, to wake/ In immortality' (*CLRS*, v. 3221).

For Southey individual cases such as these could also be valued and discussed as part of a much larger picture. The clergyman Neville White, a close friend, was congratulated for ‘having had [his] ... parents spared to you so long’, and reminded that ‘The moral influences of a good old age upon the hearts of youth and manhood cannot be appreciated too highly’ (*CLRS*, vi. 3605). Old age was, however, only exemplary if the time before it had been used wisely and had benefitted others. Father William, the narrator of ‘The Old Man’s Comforts and How He Procured Them’ (1799), affirms that his old age is a model of happiness because ‘In the days of my youth I remember’d my God,/ And he hath not forgotten my age’ (ll. 23-4; *RSPW*, v. 271). In contrast, Southey’s old friend the Norwich Unitarian and translator William Taylor offered a negative example of ‘great talents ... sadly wasted’ and ‘what is worse ... sadly misemployed’. By unsettling ‘the faith of many’, Taylor had ‘prepared for his own old age a pillow of thorns’ (*CLRS*, vi. 3740).

The connection between society and old age was not just confined to fictional elders or problematic old acquaintances. It could, for Southey, expose variations in the beliefs, customs and conduct of different nations. In *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal* (1796) anecdotes about the aged provide a commentary on both the superstition Southey believed to be endemic in Catholic countries and the lack of domestic hygiene he claimed to have encountered in the Iberian peninsula. An old woman at a Portuguese *estalagem* promises ‘a fine day tomorrow because the cat’s skin looks bright’, whilst an elderly Spaniard takes hold of the woodcock that Southey and his companions hoped to dine on and ‘poked her finger in [it] to shew us how clean the inside was’.²⁰ A more positive account of the activities of the aged was offered in *The History of Brazil* (1810-19), which records

²⁰ Robert Southey, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal* (Bristol, 1797), 257, 237.

the efforts of Sigismund Asperger, who ‘died at the age of an hundred and fourteen’, ‘practised forty years in Paraguay, and left a collection of prescriptions in which only the indigenous plants were employed’.²¹ Observations on old age were not confined to national distinctions in religion, hygiene or medicine. They could also act as a reminder of the relativity of both language and understanding of the passing of time, as in the case of a ‘Mulatto now living in Pernambuco’ and around ‘145 years old’, who when he ‘spoke of something has having happened “just now”’, meant ‘about fifty years ago’ (*CLRS*, v. 3143).

On other occasions, the linkage between society and ageing brought Southey’s attention back home, focussing it firmly on his own country. In 1819, age could be used to express his anxieties about the potential for upheaval and violence within Britain: ‘the longer revolutionary principles are allowed to be disseminated, the greater will be the danger, - for in the end they [the Radicals] will make it a struggle between youth & age, & then the weakest will go to the wall’ (*CLRS*, vi. 3379). Not all his national prognostications were as violent or gloomy. Concern about the aged poor and the impact of their hopeless impoverishment on social stability, led Southey to praise those labourers who joined benefit societies in order to secure a ‘provision against sickness, the inevitable infirmities of old age, and the expenses attendant upon death’.²² His public advocacy of the newly established Savings Banks as the most ‘beneficial institution ... devised since the foundations of civilized society were laid’, was equally driven by the belief that, by encouraging the working class to save for their old age, the banks would help to counter radicalism and ‘prove a strong bulwark for property in general’ (‘The Poor’, 219; *CLRS*, vi. 335). This same emphasis on preventing revolution by taking into account the role of the old or aged is seen too in

²¹ Robert Southey, *History of Brazil* (3 vols, London, 1810-19), iii. 338-9n.

²² ‘The Poor’, *The Quarterly Review*, 15 (April 1816), 219.

the Laureate ode ‘The Warning Voice’, written in 1819. This lauded Southey the Poet Laureate as a prophet who ‘nurs’d’ his ‘soul in solitude’, held ‘communion with immortal minds,/ Poets, & Sages of the days of old’ and used the wisdom thus gained from the writers and thinkers of the past to caution his fellow countrymen about impending peril in the present (*CLRS*, vi. 3395). Moreover, as the telling reference to ‘days of old’ reveals, for Southey, ageing and old age are not just human phenomena. They also shaped his understanding of the past and impacted on society and its productions. For Southey, ‘the institutions of men grow old like men themselves’.²³

Southey was a historian and biographer with a strong sense of his duty to comment and intervene in cultural, political and social debate. His attitude to the past was complex. At times, he was a fervent admirer of the ‘old’, praising ‘the plain straight forward style of an old narrative’ and comparing the ‘goodly and stately folios of old times’ with ‘modern pamphlets of whitey-brown paper’ (*CLRS*, vi. 3576 and 3456). Such an appreciation of the ‘old’ connected to his views on the potential impact of change on modern society. A series of observations about trees shows this at work. In a letter sent to the American writer and inventor Horatio Gates Spafford on 5 March 1817, Southey described an aged oak on the estate of Monk Hall, near to his home in Keswick:

When the estate belonged to Sir Michael Fleming, about twelve years ago, he sold the timber upon it to the person who rented the farm, an old man of the name of Slack, & this old oak, which all artists have admired, was marked ~~by~~ for the axe, & purchased with the rest. But tho Slack had paid for it he did <not> chuse to destroy the tree. He said to me, “It was there long before my time, & I would not be ~~xx~~ the man who should cut it down.” – I have

²³ [Robert Southey], *Letters from England: By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella* (3 vols, London, 1807), ii. 298.

respected the old man ever since. He has left the farm, but the Oak is yet standing. – (*CLRS*, v. 2934)

Southey's respect for Slack, an elderly tenant farmer who had preserved the oak because, not in spite, of its age, provides a striking contrast with an anecdote he related in the same letter. This dealt with the fate of a 'yew tree' 'likewise of great age & beauty', that '*was*' once 'within ... view' of Southey's home and which had been 'destroyed' in order to erect new buildings (*CLRS*, v. 2934). The contrast was stark. The oak saved by Slack was still standing, even though the latter had left Monk Hall. The situation was the reverse in Keswick where it was Southey who remained behind to lament the fate of the aged yew, cut down to further the ends of modern developers. Southey's awareness of the threat posed by his own society to the old and established was further manifested in a letter of June 1819 that described how

... this neighbourhood [Keswick] has suffered much from the axe since you were here. The woods about Lowdore are gone, so are those under Castle-crag, so is the little knot of fir trees on the way to Church, which were so placed as to make one of the features of the vale, & worst of all, so is that beautiful birch grove on the side of the lake between Barrow & Lowdore. Not a single sucker is springing up in its place, – & indeed it would require a full century before another grove could be reared which would equal it in beauty.

(*CLRS*, vi. 3318)

The perpetrator of this large-scale destruction was the Greenwich Hospital, which owned large tracts of land in and near Keswick. The Hospital was under pressure to maximise the income from its estate and as a result had carried out the felling and sale of timber, with more proposed. Such comments about the impact of modern economics upon what was old and valuable in the natural world and, indeed,

throughout society can be set alongside Southey's fear of the threat posed to social and political stability by change. As he explained in 1820, 'It is not manners & fashions alone that change with us, - the very constitution of society may undergo (& in all likelihood will) as great a change in the course of the next two or three centuries, as it has done in the last. The change is likely to be more violent & far more rapid' (*CLRS*, vi. 3526). The preservation of ancient trees, including resonant national symbols such as the aged oak at Monk Hall, thus speaks to Southey's larger concerns about the health of his own society.

Southey was, however, simultaneously ambivalent towards certain aspects of the 'old'. This is seen very clearly in the autobiographical letters he composed between 1820-26. Southey's autobiographical impulse went in a different direction from that of his direct contemporary William Wordsworth. The latter turned to blank verse in order to:

... fetch

Invigorating thoughts from former years,

... fix the wavering balance of my mind,

And haply meet reproaches ... whose power

May spur me on, in manhood now mature,

To honorable toil. (*The Prelude* (1805 text), I. 649-53)²⁴

In contrast, Southey combined personal reminiscence with social history in an avowed attempt to 'preserve as many recollections as I can of manners that even within my remembrance have past away' (*CLRS*, vi. 3518). Indeed, he was explicit

²⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979), 62.

that his autobiographical letters' 'interest & value' to future readers would be as 'sketches of a stage of society which has (already) past away' and dealt with 'a state of things which ... shall <then> have ceased to exist' (*CLRS*, vi. 3526).

Southey therefore saw his autobiographical letters as not just a history of his life that would be useful to any future biographer, but also as a valuable record of things that had been and, as such, a valuable resource for social historians of the future. This is reflected in their actual content. In a sleight of hand reminiscent of *Tristram Shandy*, one of his favourite novels, Southey takes some time to be born. His birth occurs at the end of the fourth letter (*CLRS*, 3572). Even after his appearance, the narrative frequently digresses away from Southey. He is thus strikingly absent for large parts of it. In the place of an extended account of his own self, the letters are filled with details of Southey's ancestry and information about everyday life, particularly in Bristol and the West Country, where he had been born and grown up. Indeed, it was the quotidian that interested Southey. His portrayal of Bristol in the 1760s, 1770s and 1780s, for example, does not dwell on the city's politics, even though Burke had served as its MP from 1774-80. Nor does it focus on Bristol's famous residents. Southey mentions only in passing that his mother attended the same dancing school as Mary Darby (later Robinson), 'afterwards notorious as the Prince of Wales's Perdita' (*CLRS*, vi. 3572). An encounter between Southey's infant sister, Louisa, and the elderly John Wesley, 'who was so struck with the little girls beauty, that he stopt ... & took her by the hand & gave her blessing' is similarly passed over quickly (*CLRS*, vi. 3656).

Southey did, though, pay close attention to the passing of time and social change, rather than stasis. The autobiographical letters offer a survey of the 'days of old'. They contain, for example, a great deal of information about what it was like to

be a tradesman in Bristol from the 1760s to the 1780s, not surprising as this was the time when Southey's father had been in business as a linen-draper in Wine Street, in the centre of the city. Southey points out how the physical appearance of businesses continually changed, in accordance with fashion. Shop signs hung over the street on boards were replaced by symbols painted on shop windows (Southey's father used a hare as his sign), though this process had spread only gradually to smaller towns (*CLRS*, vi. 3572). Moreover, shops in the 1760s did not even have windows, though they did by the 1780s; the only shops that were not glazed by then were ones belonging to old tradesmen who were going out of business, though as Southey says, very pointedly, continental shops had not yet caught up with this practice (*CLRS*, vi. 3514). Southey clearly retained intense memories of the physical appearance of Bristol in his youth. Yet he did not regard the changes he described as in any way to be regretted, describing a draper's shop that had not kept up with the times and had remained open to the weather as run by an old man 'fallen to decay in his old age, & sunk in sottishness' (*CLRS*, vi. 3514). He thus made a potent connection between a failing business and an individual whose old age was far from exemplary.

Southey's comments on older systems of education were equally devoid of nostalgia. He notes that 'Female education was not much regarded' when his mother (b. 1752) was a child. The 'Ladies who kept boarding schools' for girls 'in those days did not consider it necessary to possess any other knowledge themselves than that of ornamental needlework' (*CLRS*, vi. 3572). Indeed, in his mother's youth the 'best' school in Bristol had been run by a blacksmith's wife with numerous illegitimate children. Boys' education was scarcely any better. Southey's uncle had been taught by the incompetent 'Parson Collins' who, when his school failed for 'gross misconduct', kept an alehouse, something that got him into trouble with his clerical

superiors (*CLRS*, vi. 3526). Things had not improved by the time Southey was a child. In 1780-1 he briefly attended a school run by Mr Foot, a very ancient Baptist Minister. The school was failing and Southey learnt nothing, except what he contrived to teach himself. Instead he was beaten and locked in a cupboard by the superannuated schoolmaster and bullied by his fellow pupils. As he explained, he ‘saw much more of the evil side of human nature than I should ever have learnt in the course of domestic education’ (*CLRS*, vi. 3724). To Southey, this type of past was not to be regretted. Indeed, he rejoiced that it had been superseded in his own day by ‘a great improvement in the morals of middle life’ (*CLRS*, vi. 3572).

Southey’s comments on these aspects of life in the past provide an important reminder that he was not an opponent of central elements of what his contemporaries thought of as new and evidence of ‘progress’, the development of commerce, the professionalization of education and the spread of ‘respectability’. Instead he welcomed them and wondered at the strangeness of the society he had encountered in his own boyhood in comparison to that he was living in during the 1810s and 1820s. As his autobiographical letters so fully demonstrate, not all of the past was a lost paradise, not all that was old was good. Southey was a fervent critic of much of his own contemporary world, but he did not wish to turn the clock back to the 1770s, even if he could have done so. As Bill Speck so tellingly observed, Southey believed profoundly that his lifetime had seen much economic and social progress; it was Southey’s equally profound belief that the State needed to intervene to mitigate the contemporary evils of industrialism and suppress the threat of revolution that put him firmly in the conservative camp in the debates of the 1810s, 1820s and 1830s.²⁵

²⁵ W. A. Speck, ‘Robert Southey, Lord Macaulay and the Standard of Living Controversy’, *History*, 86 (October 2001), 467-77.

Southey refines understanding of the impact of the ageing process upon an individual's life and works. His sense of feeling 'old' when he was in mid-life raises important questions about our own approach to ageing. Exactly how 'old' is 'old'? It reminds us too that our sense of his life and works is shaped by the benefit of hindsight, of knowing for how long he lived and when he died. Yet Southey simultaneously does more than this. His concern with the effects of becoming or being 'old' on people, on things and on societies across the globe and across time, moves us away from the individual towards an understanding of Romantic ageing as a wider scale, connective, connecting and complex concern. In so doing, it offers an important counterpoint and corrective to ideas of Romantic individualism.